

MODEL POLICIES REGARDING MINIMUM AND OPTIMAL AVERAGE CLASS SIZES

Sections 15 and 16 of Act 153 of 2010 (formerly H.66) require the Commissioner of Education to develop model policies regarding minimum and optimal class sizes, and to post them on the DOE website. The relevant language of those two sections of Act 153 is excerpted and paraphrased as follows:

Pursuant to new subsection 16 V.S.A. § 242(5), superintendents are directed that:

“The superintendent shall be the chief executive officer for each school board in the supervisory district, and shall...

(5) work with the school boards of the member districts to develop and implement policies regarding minimum and optimal average class sizes for regular and technical education classes. The policies may be supervisory union-wide, may be course- or grade-specific, and may reflect differences among school districts due to geography or other factors.”

Supervisory unions are directed that:

“On or before January 15, 2011, the policies required by 16 V.S.A. § 242(5), regarding minimum and optimal average class sizes, shall be:

- (1) adopted by each supervisory union board and member district board;
- (2) posted on the website maintained by the supervisory union; and
- (3) forwarded to the commissioner of education.”

The Commissioner of Education is directed that:

“On or before August 31, 2010, the commissioner of education shall develop two or more model policies regarding minimum and optimal class sizes, and shall post them on the department’s website.”

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The Goals of These Policies

There are a variety of goals which are intended to be served by these policies. Quality and consistency of education services throughout Vermont are the most important among these. It is also recognized that certain classes are best adapted to smaller class sizes, and other classes are better adapted to larger class sizes. It must also be acknowledged that Vermont’s unique geography, population density and demographic trends must be considered in fashioning appropriate average minimum and optimal class size policies.

The other goal was to address the perceived problem that some classes in Vermont are so small that the quality of the education which is delivered in them is below what it should be. An extreme example of this phenomenon was a K-8 school, in a geographically remote part of the state, with a single 8th grader, and no 7th graders. The teacher of this 7th/8th grade class held a

Level II Social Studies endorsement, but only provisional endorsements in Math, English and Science, and she

openly admitted feeling unqualified to teach 8th grade Math. Some legislators therefore view minimum class sizes as a means by which to improve the quality of instruction that is delivered to students.

Balancing of SU-Wide and District-Specific Class Size Policies

The law states that class size policies *may* be SU-wide. Furthermore, the “virtual consolidation” requirements of Sections 9-14 of Act 153 of 2010 mandate increasingly uniform intra-SU operations by July 1, 2012. Nonetheless, given Vermont’s high number of small and geographically isolated schools, flexibility is necessary in fashioning appropriate average minimum and optimal class sizes. It is therefore the belief of the DOE that fashioning appropriate average minimum and optimal class sizes requires balancing of both SU-wide and District-specific policies. See the attached chart.

Regular Ed Versus Tech Ed Class Size Differentials?

Career and Technical Education (CTE) class size is primarily driven by factors related to course expectations, safety considerations, and space constraints. These factors, which drive maximum class size, may also impact minimum class size decisions, and must be evaluated in the context of guidelines specific to the course and equipment under consideration.

Grade-Specific Considerations

Research indicates that best practices regarding minimum and optimal class sizes vary to some degree by grade level. See the attached chart.

Course-Specific Considerations

Safety considerations suggest that laboratory class sizes should not exceed 24 students (with a 20-22 student optimum), depending upon classroom space. A condition of the granting of state aid for school construction requires an SU-wide room size policy -- for example 50 square feet per student in kindergarten, art classes and science laboratories, due to the nature of the particular classroom activities.

The following are space-related factors that you should consider as you fashion your class size policies:

Laboratory space requires adequate room for both group work and individual work, and must support the prescribed program of studies;

Kindergarten classrooms usually include discrete areas for gross-motor physical activity and for activity with learning materials. Research indicates that a minimum of 50 square feet per student is desirable;

Art classrooms also require somewhat greater than normal per-student space, and also have to accommodate adequate ventilation. Research indicates that a minimum of 50 square feet per student is desirable; and

Science laboratories require learning stations outfitted with gas, water and electricity, and must afford students significant space for movement, and for proper safety precautions, during laboratory investigations. Research again indicates that a minimum of 50 square feet per student is desirable.

Multi-Grade Classrooms

Multi-grade classes are covered by these policies in the same manner as single grade classrooms.

Special Education

Federal law requires that each special education student receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). For this reason, *self-contained* special education classes should be excluded from the average minimum and optimal class size calculations. Classes that include a mixture of general and special education students are covered by these policies.

Physical Education

Physical education class sizes must be designed with the unique pedagogical, equipment-related and space-related needs of that discipline in mind. This approach is indispensable to the effective delivery of the learning standards of this content area, and to the effective assessment of the degree of success of their delivery. Because of the unique characteristics of physical education classes, they should generally be excluded from the average minimum and optimal class size calculations.

English Language Learners

Incorporation of ELL students into minimum and optimal average class sizes is inherently difficult. As with students on IEPs and 504 Plans, this is partly because of the small numbers of such students, and the inherently individualized nature of their educational programs. It is also due to the somewhat transient nature of the ELL population. In addition, federal law requires that each ELL student receive the necessary language acquisition opportunities. Even so, strategies designed to immerse ELL students with their English-speaking peers, and the emerging emphasis on co-teaching practices, lend themselves to achieving desirable minimum and optimal average class sizes. Because of the unique characteristics of English language learners, they should generally be excluded from the average minimum and optimal class size calculations.

Distance Learning Classes

The 2010 legislative session expanded the availability of distance learning for Vermont students, and it is expected that this trend will continue in legislative sessions to come. Distance learning affords students access to courses that would otherwise be unavailable, either due to the lack of locally qualified teachers, or due to the cost of teaching. It is recommended that for purposes of

calculating minimum and optimal average class sizes, the total number of students and teachers at all sites be considered in the calculation.

Existing State Board Rules Regarding Maximum Class Sizes

Relevant to the issue of minimum and optimal class sizes is the manner in which the State Board of Education constrains maximum class sizes. Portions of SBE Rule 2120.8.2 are as follows:

2120.8.2 Staff

...

(b) At the elementary level, classes in grades K-3, when taken together, shall average fewer than 20 students per teacher. In grades 4-8, when taken together, classes shall average fewer than 25 students per teacher.

(c) At the secondary level, the total class rolls of an English language arts teacher shall not exceed 100 students. In other disciplines, class rolls shall not average more than 150 students per teacher, except where the specific nature of the teacher's assignment, such as in certain art, music, or physical education programs, is plainly adaptable to the teaching of greater numbers of students while meeting the educational goals of the program.

...

(e) Each school shall employ sufficient and qualified special education staff as are needed to identify students eligible for special education services and to implement each eligible student's Individual Education Plan and Section 504 plan.

...

Attached Chart Illustrating SU-Wide and District-Specific Model Policies

The attached chart is adapted from an existing set of policies that are in place in a particular Vermont Supervisory Union, and that balance both SU-wide and District-specific needs.

Model Class-Size Chart (Minimum, Optimal and Maximum)					
Grade Cluster		Instructional Area	Minimum Average per Grade Cluster	Optimal Average Range per Grade Cluster	State Board Maximum Average per Grade Cluster per SBE Rule 2120.8.2
District 1	District 2				
K-3	K-2	All	15	15-18	20
	3-4	All	15	15-18	20
4-5	5-6	All	15	15-20	25
6-8	7-8	All (except PE)	15	15-22	25
6-8	7-8	PE	15	15-22	30
Grade Cluster		Instructional Area	Minimum Average per Course/Content Area	Optimum Average per Course/Content Area	Maximum Average per Course/Content Area per SBE Rule 2120.8.2
9-12		PE	20	15-25	30
9-12		Music	18	15-22	30
9-12		General/Other	18 ²	15-22	25 ¹
9-12		“Singleton” Courses	15 ²	15-22	25 ¹

Note: Above numbers may be altered due to irreconcilable space limitations and/or equipment needs

¹ not to exceed 150 total students per teacher (composition only)

² Remedial courses may be exempt from this minimum average